

## **ROOM FOR MANEUVER? ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES OF AID AND FOOD IMPORT DEPENDENCY IN WESTERN SAMOA**

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"I wish every chief in these islands would turn to and work and build roads and sow fields and plant food trees and educate his children and improve his talents for the love of his brothers and his children and the whole body of generations yet unborn."

Robert Louis Stevenson  
Apia, Western Samoa, 1894

### **INTRODUCTION**

In May 1979, a joint delegation of UNDP and UNCTAD officials visited Western Samoa to investigate the possibilities of direct grant assistance to suitable projects available from a Special Least Developed Countries fund. Almost all Ministries were forewarned of the visit and invited to put forward proposals to the Prime Minister's Department. Although an inter-ministerial Aid Co-ordinating committee existed, its members were not involved at this stage and the possibility of obtaining approved funding rested primarily on an ability to present a good case - at very short notice - to the Prime Minister's Department and gain the support of the Financial Secretary.

The chosen project, accepted in principle almost immediately by UNDP, was for a cool store to hold bananas and taro (coco yam) and small quantities of other fresh items prior to export. Some holding facility appeared to be necessary in view of the Government's concern to seek to re-establish its quality banana export market in New Zealand, partly through the development of a new 80 hectare plantation. A unit of this size - with potential for expansion in the light of twice-monthly shipments, called for cool holding facilities on a scale not required by the smaller producer, although it was anticipated that the Government banana marketing scheme would use the storage for short periods in advance of shipment.

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Government and (in principle) UNDP had made a decision on the project on extremely limited technical, financial and economic analysis. No recognizable feasibility study was produced at this stage, although the resident UNDP Representative did ultimately authorize the recruitment of an independent technical consultant to prepare the design proposals and draw up tender specifications. When tenders were opened it was discovered that the store and associated infrastructure could not be constructed for the \$500,000 envisaged by UNDP. The grant was eventually extended to \$900,000.

One reason why the capital cost of the project was so far out of line with the original earmarked sum was that in the absence of any financial and economic analysis prior to the decision to finance the project, the technical consultant was instructed to draw up design plans for frozen foods storage as well as cool holding. As the export use of freezer space was at the time limited to comparatively small quantities of frozen fruit pulp, the capacity planned was justified as a source of auxiliary freezer capacity for importers.

Thus a commercially and economically dubious project, inadequately planned but financed by a multilateral aid agency, relied for its justification - at least on the scale it was constructed - on a continuing buoyant importation trade in frozen meat, fish and dairy products.

Although the UNDP financed Apia Cool Store has yet to be formally evaluated, it already focuses attention - albeit in a dramatic way - on the aid and food dependency paradox. A project designed to assist towards growing self-reliance by facilitating exports, also makes increasing provision for, and to an extent depends on, increasing food imports. It will be seen that this kind of paradox is not confined to a single project; it is one which has become built into the aid/trade relationships between a dependent economy and bilateral aid supplying countries supported in a variety of ways by multilateral agencies. This paper examines the extent of food import dependency in its historical social contexts and attempts to establish a framework for evaluating government policy.

## WESTERN SAMOA

Western Samoa (see map) is a small island country isolated in mid South Pacific. The islands are of volcanic origin and are situated some 4,235 kms. south of Hawaii and 2,500 kms. northeast of New Zealand. The capitals of Tonga and Fiji are respectively 1,250 and 1,320 kms. distance from Apia, the Western Samoa capital. Pago Pago in American Samoa is 135 kms. away.

Situated between latitudes 13 degrees and 14 degrees south, the climate is tropical with high humidity levels, average temperatures of 27 degrees and limited seasonal variation. The country consists of four inhabited islands; Upolu and Savaii and the much smaller Manono and Apolima, situated in the 21 kms. strait between the two "large" islands. Savaii, the

least populated but largest island, extends to a height of 1,859 meters and Upolu which is also made up of a series of interlocking volcanic plateaux and ridges, steep-sided valleys and narrow coastal plains, has a maximum altitude of 1,097 meters. Of a total population of 156,00 (1981), 75% live on Upolu (36,000 in Apia), and the overall average density is 55 per square km. The compact nature of the country has, in comparison with much of the rest of Oceania, facilitated the development of good internal communications. Apia is, by South Pacific standards, a thriving, well established port, administrative and commercial center.

The country has a chequered colonial history. An administratively and politically impossible ten year period of tripartite "rule" of the Samoan islands between Britain, Germany and the USA ended in 1899 when the eastern islands (now American Samoa) became a US territory, and the western islands became a German colony. In 1914, on the outbreak of the First World War, the administration passed to New Zealand. This was later ratified under, firstly, a League of Nations, and then a United Nations Mandate. Full political independence from New Zealand was achieved in 1962. Western Samoa is a member of the Commonwealth, the United Nations, the Asian Development Bank, the South Pacific Forum, and the South Pacific Commission. As an ACP country, funds have been available from the EC under Lome I and II.

#### FOOD IMPORT DEPENDENCE

The table below illustrates in dramatic fashion the extent of the increase in imports of all items since Independence. It also indicates the extent to which the total value of imports has risen more rapidly than prices. In constant price terms, the 1978/9 import levels were almost twice the level of 1971/2.

TABLE 1: *Food Import Dependence on Western Samoa*  
(December 1980)

	1963	1972	1979
Total imports (x 1000 T)	3,007	13,044	60,946
Food imports (x 1000 T)	1,928	3,296	11,868
Population (x 1000)	121.3	148.1	161.0
Food imports per capita (T)	15.9	22.3	73.7
Consumer price index	78	100	251
Food in CPI	NA	100	281
Food imports as % total	64	25	19

1 Tala (T) = US \$ 1.08

Source: Government of Western Samoa

The proportion of Food and Beverages in Total Imports has, not surprisingly, declined since Independence. From a slow beginning there has been a year by year increase in development expenditure and, in more recent years a rapid increase in expenditure on non-food consumer imports, vehicles, agricultural inputs, machinery and fuel. In 1979, expenditure on fuel oil alone made up almost 40% of the FOB value of all exports and for the same year the total imports of food, beverages and tobacco almost cancelled out total receipts from exports. For food items alone, the 1979 level of imports deflated to 1972 prices, has an index of 128 on a 1972 base of 100. In real terms per capita food imports continued to increase through to 1980 - albeit at a declining rate after 1975. There was little change in the composition of food imports over the 1972-79 period. Meat and Meat Products (27% of Total Food Imports in 1979) predominate together with Cereals (22%), Fish and Fish Products (17%) and Sugar (13%). The only discernible decline in real terms during the 1970's was in Dairy Products and Eggs where some genuine import substitution seems to have taken place.

In terms of targets set for the production (and export) of agricultural products, performance during the Third National Plan [7] fell far short of the projected targets. Reviewing this the writer of the first chapter of the current (1980-84) Plan comments as follows:

"...cocoa and banana exports continue to decline, copra exports fluctuated about a slowly rising trend while the production of beef, pig meat, poultry, and fish remained well below existing potential. The consequence has been a deterioration in the balance of payments and increased dependence on foreign aid and imported goods."

In 1979 and 1980 in response to alarmingly low levels of foreign exchange reserves, the Government imposed foreign exchange rationing and devised an allocation procedure for import permits for certain categories of non-essential food items. High levels of inflation increasingly eroded the real value of wages and increased the extent of dependence on both public and private transfers. In recent years the Government of Western Samoa has introduced a range of instruments to encourage new import substituting and/or export oriented activities. To the extent that a range of food items - but in particular canned meats, meat products, fish and dairy produce - are imported in a processed form, it has been Government policy to encourage more local value added, employment and (in principle but not always in practice) net foreign exchange savings to be generated. A recent UNCTAD sponsored study has proposed changes to the tariff structure and the operation of the Enterprise Incentives Scheme (established in 1966). The limited size of the local market and the high cost of imported components are the major and enduring constraints on both local and foreign based investors and although some opportunities will be identified such incentives as



exist could with advantage be directed towards increasing the output of existing agricultural exports and the development of new export oriented processing activities.

## AID DEPENDENCE

Although it is extremely difficult to build up a totally accurate picture of aid and preferential loan term finance to Western Samoa in recent years, all the indications show an increasing extent of aid dependence against a background of worsening balance of trade and payments positions and expanding development program.

Total official external debt outstanding at the end of 1979 was T33.15 million with debt service amounting to approximately 7% of visible export earnings. This ratio is however likely to increase markedly as grace periods expire for loans contracted in the 1970s.

Official aid transfers with the main bilateral sources of New Zealand, Australia and West Germany predominating and the important multilateral suppliers being the Asian Development Bank, World Bank (IDA) and the EC, increased rapidly over the 1970s.

The most comprehensive figure is that provided by the Government in its submissions to the United Nations Least Developed Countries Conference in 1981 [9]. In what is described as a "rough" indication of amounts received in recent years the 1979 figure is shown as T24,422 (000). Of this amount bilateral aid has been predominantly, although not exclusively, in the form of grants with soft-term loans mainly from multilateral sources reaching approximately T10 million in 1980. Thus we have an overall per capita aid figure in the region of T150 per annum<sup>1</sup>. In the per capita league table of South Pacific aid recipients this is a comparatively low figure with only Kiribati, Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea and Fiji showing lower values. This is in part a reflection of the disproportionately large amount of aid per capita required by very small countries but also the high level of budgetary support for such USA, French and to a lesser degree New Zealand - associated countries as Guam, American Samoa, Pacific Islands Trust Territories, French Polynesia, New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna, Cook Islands, Niue and Tokelau.

The Government of Western Samoa is - according to the current National Plan - well aware of the dangers inherent in a sustained and increasing aid dependence. A key objective of national planning is to reduce over

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<sup>1</sup> The Statistical Summary of the South Pacific Commission has a somewhat higher per capita Official Development Assistance figure for 1979 of T190 but this appears to include some multilateral commitments (especially from the IDA) not yet disbursed.

time the degree of dependence on foreign aid. More specifically in a chapter in the Plan spelling out the criteria for foreign aid, it is recognized that the country:

"may be approaching the stage where the obvious advantages of aid are outweighed by the less obvious, but not less real disadvantages."

Amongst some of the disadvantages cited are the following:

- a general level of expectation inappropriate to the country's stage of development, which perpetuates and even deepens dependence on aid;
- redirection of thinking away from solutions based on local resources in favor of those based on aid donors' resources and preferences;
- demotivation brought about by a remittance mentality; thrift, effort and enterprise are devalued by too heavy a inflow of unearned resources.

Less than one year after the publication date of the current Plan, the Government's submission to the United Nations Least Developed Countries Conference called for a ten year program of aid to fund not only the foreign exchange components of all the major public sector projects, but also up to T6 million per annum of local development and recurrent expenditure. The net effect of such a provision - were it forthcoming - would be to double the current levels of aid at a time when there is already (see above) understandable and justifiable concern about the implications. Such however is in the nature of the dilemma; attempts at long term development planning for agricultural and infrastructural investment against a background of acute persistent and current budgetary limitations.

The room for maneuver is very limited, short of a revolutionary and unlikely change in political philosophy. Western Samoa together with most of the other states of the South Pacific region, will remain a very dependent country for the indefinite future. Such scope for change as exists would appear to require a more direct recognition of the nature of the problem and of the economy's inherent strengths and weaknesses. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the country had drifted into an increased level of aid dependence at a time when bilateral aid and (especially) multilateral funds were increasingly available, without the benefit of a consistent and workable development policy.

Any evaluation of planning and performance must however avoid the error of analyzing objectives, criteria, methods and results in isolation from the underlying social and cultural framework upon which (or within which) Government policies operate. The following two sections of this paper are concerned with illustrating some aspects of the relationship between Samoan social patterns and food import dependency and also with the influences of migration and remittance.

## SAMOAN SOCIAL PATTERNS AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF IMPORTED FOOD ITEMS

Western Samoa - regarded by Samoans as the heartland of Polynesia - has a very stable culture and many aspects of Fa'a Samoa (Samoan way of life) are continually re-enforced. As one of the writers of the definitive geography of the country has commented:

"Tradition dies hard in Samoa ... nowhere else in the Pacific is innovation so resolutely resisted and in few other territories is the cult of custom so deeply revered. Community responsibilities and community participation ranging from a church opening to a fish drive, or from a wedding to the building of a pig fence, are paramount. On the other hand, skill and diligence on the land are accorded little recognition and husbandry is detrimentally affected by time consuming community activity. (Ward in Fox and Cumberland [2, pp. 232/3].

Samoans have over the past 150 years shown themselves to be remarkable adept at absorbing new styles and cultures (and patterns of consumption). Thus for example, christianity was not only embraced widely from 1830s onwards, but very rapidly incorporated into the pattern of village life. This pattern is basically one of small aiga (family groups) each headed by a matai (Chief) living in small villages ranging in size from 200 to 600 people. An average village population excel people. In each of the 360 or so separately identifiable villages, individual matais are responsible for the allocation and use of land and the distribution of produce and income within the family. Currently 12,500 matais hold over 16,000 individual titles.

In some villages - particularly those close to Apia on the North-West coast of Upolu - the customary allegiance of untitled men and their families to a matai has been eroded by the growing extent of cash income sources. However, communalism remains the dominant force in Samoan Village life and on the 78% of the total land area held in trust by the matais a neo-traditional form of society has survived substantially intact.

Against this background the early penetration of local trading stores was an important factor determining the spread of imported 'convenience' foods. The beginnings of import food dependency can be traced back to the middle of the 19th century with the establishment of the first trading companies. In 1857 a major German trading house selected Apia as a South Pacific base and together with other smaller operations began to supply initially non-food items (including firearms) in return for coconut oil and later copra. The period of German colonial rule saw an increase in trading activities, the introduction of cocoa and the establishment of coconut plantations. Trade expansion was facilitated by the improvement in canning processes in Australia, New Zealand and Europe and the increased regularity of shipping. The larger metropolitan based traders

widened the range of food items on offer and followed the pattern of the early German companies in encouraging village level crop purchase through local import stocking agents.

A number of items, but especially tinned beef, fish and 'cabin' biscuits became prized and sought after as suitable, and prestigious items for use in village to village, aiga to aiga and person to person gift exchange. The old pattern embraced the new. Nonperishable imported food items became part of the o'oloa group of goods; that is goods produced by men traditionally exchanged for toga goods (items made by women). Thus food, tools and canoes would be exchanged for mats, baskets and tapa (mulberry bark cloth). Some imported food stuffs became valued as much for their prestige significance in ceremonial exchange as for the new tastes and convenience they presented to those purchasing for their own consumption [3]. In Western Samoa pisupo (canned corned beef) occupies a special position as a most prized consumer item.

As almost all group social and cultural activities include a feast and as pisupo is such a priority item on such occasions corned beef has become a 'traditional' food to rank alongside creamed coconut, lagoon fish, breadfruit, taro and bananas. Although there has been a slight fall off in importations in recent years due to higher world beef prices and import restrictions, 275 tons with an approximate cif value of T750,000 were imported in 1979.

Canned fish, especially tuna, herring and mackerel (from Japan and USA) are consumed through Samoa and stocked in even the smallest village store. Like pisupo, canned fish are acceptable exchange goods and because of their relative cheapness and convenience are also a part of the regular household diet. In a country surrounded by rich if depleted lagoon and reef and also by unexploited deep sea fishing areas, the maintenance of recent imports are close to the 1,300 ton levels of 1973/4 gives no cause for satisfaction. In 1979 and 1980 some of the incentive to buy (or catch) the local product was at least temporarily reduced by the provision of large consignments of exports grade Japanese "Aid" canned tuna distributed through the Treasury Department at highly subsidized rates.

The main perishable imported meat items are mutton off-cuts (mainly from New Zealand) and chicken backs (USA). These are low cost items being almost waste products of export and processing industries. In Samoan villages, no less than in the town of Apia, they have become an integral part of everyday diet as many villages have electricity or adequate kerosene refrigeration in local stores to keep adequate stocks. Although not normally prestige exchange goods they have become increasingly popular to the extent that the 1979 importation level of mutton (tons) was greater than the 1970 level by a factor of 2.5. Importations of poultry meat increased by a factor of 8 over the same period.

## MIGRATION AND REMITTANCE

Migration of both a temporary and permanent nature has been an important feature of the development of the economy since the early 1950s. Over the period 1954-79 net out migration of Western Samoa citizens has totalled over 40,000 - or one quarter of the 1981 population - with a net average of 2,000 per annum since Independence. The majority of long-stay or permanent migrants moved to New Zealand where Samoans make up the largest recent immigrant group in the population. Western Samoans have also settled permanently in California and Hawaii and on a more temporary basis in American Samoa. The influence of Pago Pago (American Samoa) on food consumption patterns was particularly strong in the period immediately after the end of World War II, when employment opportunities encouraged a flow of temporary migrants from Western Samoa. Even with the subsequent restrictions on employment there is a continuous interchange of visitors to from Apia and Pago Pago as family connections are maintained. The 'Americanization' of Eastern Samoa led inevitable from the establishment of the USA Naval and Air Force bases and despite the large disparity income levels new patterns of consumption spread rapidly of Western Samoa. This influence has been re-enforced by temporary migrants to New Zealand who returned with a developed taste for food and beverages which could only be met by importation.

Migration to New Zealand in particular has had the further equally significant effect of supplementing family cash incomes through private remittances to a sufficient degree as to allow import related consumption to become in-built into established dietary and social patterns. Village level research [4] has shown how the importance of remittances has changed from one of relative insignificance at Independence to a position where they are now a major influence on personal spending. In the face of stagnating agricultural production, the level of food imports has continued to increase year by year with an increasing proportion being funded directly from remittance income.

One of the most outstanding features of the economy of Western Samoa is the significance of invisibles and transfers in the current account. Taking 1978 as an example year for which partially verifiable data is available, earnings from exported commodities contributed 21% of total foreign exchange earnings whereas private remittances made up 39%. It is clear that the contribution to the cash economy of the country which is made by those members of the aiga living (temporarily or permanently) overseas has become increasingly important in recent years. There is a continuing requirement for the Fa'a Samoa to maintain its cohesive social system of responsibility and obligation not only inside but also outside the country as a means of ensuring a continuing flow of remittances back to the aiga.

From the viewpoint of the Government the dilemma is an obvious one although not openly expounded in policy statements. The strength and

vitality of the socio/cultural base of Samoan life has to be maintained. In many respects the credibility of the existence of the country as a sovereign state is determined by its social and cultural cohesion. Unfortunately the same forces which maintain the structure of the Fa'a Samoa also contribute to the impoverishment of the domestic economy.

### SOME CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Any evaluation of development policy must be carried out from within the framework of the changing economic, social and political environment. Economically the country is increasingly aid dependent with its export trade being concentrated on two major agricultural items. Industrial opportunities are extremely limited although some scope for local processing of food items to replace imports does exist. Although the social environment is changing it appears to be doing so in approved Samoan style. The Fa'a Samoa although holding on to the traditional priorities of village life has also become remarkably dependent upon imported influence and material goods. Almost all aiga have overseas connections which encourage and permit a standard of living which without significant changes in patterns of land holding and use is only sustainable on a personal basis by the maintenance of private transfers and which is totally unsustainable from the viewpoint of the Government. Subsistence affluence [1] has given way to a more materialistic and tenuous dependence which has not yet provoked sustained attempts at increasing agricultural production and productively and which appears to militate against such progress.

At the political level it has to be recognized that New Zealand will have great difficulty sustaining the levels of Samoan immigration of recent years and that there is likely to be a trade-off between sustaining aid levels and reducing permanent settlement. As and when increased recurrent budgetary support is forthcoming (and this has to be from bilateral rather than multilateral sources) this trade-off may become more painfully obvious to both countries.

The key to improvements, to a stabilization of the rate of increase in dependency will be the productive development of the agricultural sector. It is instructive to examine the conclusion of the Asian Development Bank, a major multinational (project) aid provider to Western Samoa. In 1979 the ADB commissioned a South Pacific Agricultural Survey with the prime aim of identifying the most promising areas of Bank involvement in the rural economies of the South Pacific island member countries. The survey of agricultural development in Western Samoa highlighted the apparent inability of the small holder agricultural sector to generate growth and recognized that a major portion of total population had extremely good access to government provided services of education, health care, communications and water supply, well above average for a less-developed country. The writers concluded that the existence of such services:

"must surely add to the disincentive to work hard for commercial reward; much of society has reached some form of temporary (or perhaps semi-permanent) plateau of satisfaction."  
(Ward & Proctor [6])

While accepting that the majority of the population would continue to operate within a mixed subsistence cash-cropping sector the main recommendation emanating from the survey was that the key to agricultural growth and (therefore) enhanced economic progress lay in the expansion and intensification of what was termed a 'plantation mode' of management .

Although a number of ADB and IDA assisted projects are currently directed towards rehabilitation of Government owned estates operated by the Western Samoa Trust Estates Corporation, the advice of the ADB survey team was that significant increases in export production in the longer term would only be forthcoming if the plantation mode was extended to land held by matais under customary tenure. If this analysis is correct the challenge to Government (currently elected by matais franchise only) is extremely great. It involves not only a public recognition that the structure of traditional land holding and usage is inappropriate and demotivating but also a willingness to create a new agency to lease village land from matais and embark on more intensive crop and livestock production.

Although this may eventually evolve, it is necessary to note that other aid agencies (New Zealand, Australia and the EC) have in recent years been assisting the Government in a Rural Development Programme which is concentrated entirely on providing a means to increase production through the existing social system. A recent interim evaluation of the Programme has concluded that an insufficient proportion of the funds allocated to village level projects has as yet contributed directly to increased production, although it is almost certainly too early for dogmatic conclusions. [5]

With this in mind it is tempting to see the Government of Western Samoa as being coerced into policies: last year Rural Development at village level, next year agricultural production via parastatal agency. It is certainly true that aid agencies operating in small countries (and perhaps some larger ones) persistently underestimate the extent to which their project identification, preparation, appraisal (and now monitoring and evaluation) procedures, increasingly 'capture' the scarce resources of skilled managerial talent within the Government department. This in itself is a serious problem which in turn creates the kind of planning vacuum within which an apparent coercion or strategy dependence develops. When the South Pacific Forum reviewed aid policy in the region in 1976 it concluded that aid to the South Pacific should be increased but that it should be more flexible and adaptable to the needs of the poorer countries. The members of the working party (SPEC 1976) also recommended that:



"the machinery of aid should be simplified, aid issues publicly discussed and communication between agencies improved."

Although there is little doubt that the agencies have (at least in Western Samoa) been able to demonstrate increased flexibility, it is questionable whether there has been much improvement in simplifying procedures, discussing the main issues or developing inter-agency communication.

In an economy which has become overdependent on imported food, aid and advice, but which is currently in such dire financial straits, it is perhaps unrealistic to recommend that the aid agencies should be more circumspect. The longer term answers are not however entirely outside the control of the Samoans themselves. It is likely that in years to come many evaluators of Western Samoa's economic progress will include recommendations not too dissimilar - but less poetically expressed - than those of Robert Louis Stevenson with which this paper began.

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**APPENDIX****SOME ECONOMIC INDICATORS WESTERN SAMOA**

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GDP/Capita (1980)(approx.)	\$600
% Total Exports from Agriculture	95%
Labour Force in Agriculture	70%
1981 Population (Census)	156,000
Projected 1987 Population	162,000
Natural Population Growth Rate	3%
Population under 15 years	48%
Literacy	96%
Children entering secondary schools	72%
Trade Deficit 1970 adjusted*	\$38,340,000

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\*Importation of Western Samoa Vessel for Pacific Forum line not included.

LOCATION MAP OF WESTERN SAMOA  
(distance in miles)

